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ABSTRACT

Career Beginnings (CB) is a national program begun in 1985 to increase the likelihood of minority and other disadvantaged urban students to participate in postsecondary education or to obtain a good job. CB unites high schools, businesses, and local colleges in working partnerships to develop the potential of moderately-achieving high school students and help them overcome their social and educational deficiencies by exposing them to the college environment and the world of work in a personal way. The program provides the following services: (1) college and career preparation; (2) summer and school-year work experience; (3) academic tutoring; (4) counseling and support services; and (5) individual guidance and encouragement from adult mentors from the business and professional communities. Participants are targeted during the beginning of their junior year in high school and attend a series of structured workshops to assist them make the transition from youth to adulthood. Each student is matched with a mentor who meets with the student at least once a month to discuss career and college planning. Students have the opportunity to work in entry-level jobs with career potential to teach them the demands of the workplace. Ongoing advising, advocacy, and counseling is provided year-round to keep the student focused on his/her goals. In the first three years of the program, 95 percent of the participants graduated from high school, 65 percent attended college, and 80 percent of those students completed their second year of college. In October 1988, 90 percent of the graduates were either in college, enrolled in training programs, in the military, or on the job. A list of 16 references and a list of titles in the Phi Delta Kappa Fastback Series are appended. (FMW)

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FASTBACK

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Career Beginnings: Helping Disadvantaged Youth Achieve Their Potential

William M. Bloomfield

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Career Beginnings: Helping Disadvantaged Youth Achieve Their Potential

by
William M. Bloomfield

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Introduction

All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means that all children, by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself.

– *A Nation at Risk*, 1983

Remember the American dream? That's the belief that everyone – regardless of economic status or ethnic or family background – has an equal chance to graduate from high school, to go to college or get a good job, and to succeed in life. Today, that dream is little more than a hollow promise for many young people in America's inner cities. For hundreds of thousands of poor, minority, or otherwise disadvantaged teenagers, the American dream has become a myth or, worse, a joke – a joke on them.

Although some would argue that the situation is not that bad, the facts say otherwise. We face an unprecedented crisis in our schools and a serious labor shortage in industry. Here are the facts:

- Every year about one million young people drop out of high school before the 12th grade. In some inner-city schools, dropout rates exceed 50% with minority youth the most at risk. (Reported in *Business Week*, 19 September 1988.)

• Of those who do graduate from high school each year, as many as 25% read or write below the eighth-grade level. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching found that "only 229 of 1,918 students at one Los Angeles high school scored at grade level in reading. In standardized tests between 1983 and 1986, American high school seniors came in last in biology among students from 13 countries, including Hungary and Singapore" (reported in *Fortune*, 7 November 1988).

• Disadvantaged minority students are more often deficient in basic skills than their advantaged peers. The National Assessment of Educational Progress found that while 60% of white young adults could locate information in a news article or an almanac, only 25% of black young adults and 40% of Hispanics could do the same task, and that illiteracy among minority students may be as high as 40% (reported in *Business Week*, 19 September 1988, and *Fortune*, 7 November 1988). Reseachers were distressed to find that "on virtually every major standardized test, minorities and the poor are concentrated in the bottom fifth of the test score distribution" (Berlin and Sum 1988).

• Minority group members are far less likely to have a college education. In 1986, one in five whites over the age of 25 had completed four years of college or more. The rate for blacks was approximately one in 10, and for Hispanics only one in 12 (Commission on Minority Participation and American Life 1988).

These alarming findings reflect a trend toward educational mediocrity and decline in our public schools and a lack of attention to the problem at the college level. If this trend is allowed to continue, it holds grave consequences not only for the educational and career aspirations of millions of young adults but also for the economic future of the nation.

For almost 30 years, state and federal policymakers have devised well-intentioned schemes and programs to counteract the debilitating effects of poverty, inadequate preparation for work, and limited educa-

tional opportunities. Although some economic and social gains have resulted from these efforts by both the public and private sectors – at a cost of millions of dollars – it is hard to point to many programs that have lived up to their sponsors' hopes. In the area of education and youth employment, the record has not been good at all.

This fastback will look at the critical issues of youth employment and education and will examine in detail one possible solution: Career Beginnings, a new national program that is helping economically, educationally, and socially disadvantaged students to graduate from high school, to go on to college or start a career, and to become productive citizens.

The Urban High School Experience: A National Failure

Low-income students, particularly minority students, have long been underserved by the education system. Poor children, living in declining neighborhoods and attending poorly funded and inadequately staffed schools, are at a disadvantage from the start. The problems they face – poverty, neglect, low self-esteem – start before they enter the public schools but show up in elementary school where study habits are supposed to be established. Instead, little learning takes place; and the combination of social and educational deficits puts these youngsters on the road to failure at an early age.

Even when they attempt to keep up in the classroom, they fall further behind because they have not mastered basic concepts early in their school experience. Unfortunately, without encouragement from teachers and counselors, this cycle is likely to continue. By adolesence they simply give up, turn off, and drop out. For those students who do stay in high school, many get by only marginally; and those that graduate often drift into low-paying, low-skill jobs. Without a solid high school academic experience behind them and the encouragement of successful adults, even high-achieving students frequently see high school as a way station – something to get through as quickly as possible – rather than as a passport to future career opportunities.

If you were to visit any medium to large city in the United States today, what would you see if you walked into a public high school? Could you tell who is poor and who is not? Which students would

be most likely to graduate and which to drop out? As you watched the students leave at the end of the day, would you be able to tell how many, and which ones, will enroll in college and complete their degrees? Let's look at a prototypical urban high school.

Welcome to West Side High! This school sits in the middle of a neighborhood that 15 years ago was considered a respectable and decent place to raise a family. Today, the houses are mostly in disrepair – the original owners long since gone, having sold the property and their dreams at a loss. The average income level of families now living in the neighborhood has dropped below the poverty line. Not surprisingly, West Side High serves mostly poor students, the majority of whom are black and Hispanic. The rest, around 25%, are either white or of Asian descent, mostly poor but some from blue-collar families with moderate incomes.

After talking with the principal, you might be disturbed to find out that at least one of every four ninth-graders probably will not graduate; they will drop out before the end of their senior year. Dig a little deeper and you learn that the dropout rates are higher for the poor and minority students – often 50% or more. Once outside, you would probably see some kids hanging out on street corners and in fast-food restaurants, not working. One consequence of dropping out, of course, is the lack of job opportunities. High school dropouts are three times more likely to be unemployed than are graduates. Today, close to 75% of all high school dropouts, particularly black and Hispanic teenagers, are unable to find full-time jobs.

Not surprisingly, unemployment as a teenager has long-term effects on future employment. It is always harder to get a job if you have never worked. In 1985, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that there were 892,000 youths from 16 to 20, mainly high school dropouts, who had never worked; and the bureau concluded that teenagers without work experience are likely to be chronically unemployed as adults. The statistics have not changed significantly in succeeding years. Someone once commented half-jokingly that if we

wait long enough, the problem of unemployed teenagers will "age" out. No one is laughing much at that comment anymore.

Poverty Affects Performance

As report after report shows, where there are high concentrations of poor and minority students, the number of dropouts increases dramatically. Using such family poverty indicators as low-income, low-skill wage, and limited educational background, disadvantaged youth are three times more likely to be school dropouts than their advantaged classmates across town (National Center for Educational Statistics 1988).

As you walk the halls of West Side High School, you may not be able to determine who are nearly poor and who are known, in today's terms, as the "persistently poor." Most kids are good at masking their real economic situation from outsiders. But West Side has a lot of very poor students, a high proportion of whom are from minority groups. In 1984, 46.2% of black children and 38.7% of Hispanic children met federal poverty standards, compared with 16.1% of white youngsters. With poverty there is a high correlation with lower academic achievement, fewer high school graduates, and a smaller percentage attending college.

The U.S. Census Bureau has found that single-parent families generally have a much tougher time maintaining an income level above the poverty line than do two-parent households. One should not be surprised, then, to learn that among those high school students living in single-parent families, more than half are poor. We should also note that by the year 2000, it is estimated that one in four children in the United States will be living in poverty (Children's Defense Fund 1989).

The Gap in the Educational Pipeline

What post-high school plans do the students of West Side High have? By May of their senior year, most students have decided what they

will be doing after graduation. But only about one-third of black and Hispanic high school graduates enter some form of post-secondary education. There are a number of reasons for this: poor educational preparation, inadequate counseling, financial worries, and so on. Another reason – as important or perhaps more important than any of the others – is a lack of encouragement from home and especially from school.

One clear indicator that our schools fail to prepare and encourage these youngsters for higher education is that they do not take the standard college entrance exams offered in the junior and senior years. Often they are not even told about the test dates. In 1985, only 70,000 black (9%) and 17,000 Hispanic (3%) high school seniors took the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), for a total of only 8.3% of the 1.05 million students who took the test nationwide. If you don't take the test, you cannot apply for admission to many four-year colleges.

Moreover, based on the lack of academic preparation, those disadvantaged students who do take the SAT do not do very well. Black and Hispanic students are twice as likely to score below 400 in both the verbal and math portions of the SAT than are whites (Commission on Minority Participation and American Life 1988). These statistics portend grave consequences for the future labor force, because even as college enrollment rates among minorities fall, job projections for the year 2000 will require a labor force whose median level of education is 13.5 years, as compared to 12.8 years now (*Workforce 2000*, 1987).

This pattern of institutional neglect of the disadvantaged and poor may start at primary school, but it continues on to the college level as well. In the 1960s, the picture began looking better after federal legislation made it possible for poor youngsters to enroll in and successfully complete college. This increase in college attendance continued into the 1970s as federal support, particularly the Pell Grants in the Higher Education Act of 1972, resulted in a dramatic rise in minority college enrollments. But in the last 10 years, college enroll-

ment rates for minority students have fallen and remain disproportionately low, thus reversing those earlier gains.

Let's look beyond the statistics and meet two students, Jackie F. and Hector M., composites of typical urban high school students.

Jackie is 17 and a senior at Lincoln High School, located in a large city on the East Coast. The official dropout rate at Lincoln is 35%, but Jackie thinks it is higher. She has seen more than half of her friends leave school. She isn't worried, though, because she plans to go to college after graduation. To make sure she has the best possible chance to attend a good college, Jackie and a few of her friends are studying for the SAT after school. Jackie's mother is pleased, but somewhat surprised, at her daughter's new-found interest in school. "I had no chance to learn; schools in my hometown were poor, and we didn't have the same as the students 'cross town'," said her mother, who did not complete high school herself and had no other opportunities for further education.

Three thousand miles away in California, Hector M. is listening to his best friend talk about getting a job as a short-order cook at a downtown restaurant after high school graduation, or maybe even dropping out and taking that job now. Hector listens but says that he is not interested in doing anything like that because he has a career goal in mind. Hector is planning to be an accountant. Just five years before, Hector and his family had arrived from Central America. He spoke no English and had to work before and after school each day to earn money for his family. As a result, he was just barely getting by in class. This year his grades have improved, and he recognizes how further education and training can help him achieve his dream.

Statistically, these two students are not very different from thousands of high school students across the country. The difference, though, is that a year ago, Jackie, the oldest of four in a single-parent household, was getting average grades but reading below grade level. Hector was planning to work at his uncle's garage after he fin-

ished high school, if he finished. Last year, Jackie and Hector were considered high-risk students. Some might even have described them as disconnected from the education mainstream, destined for marginal jobs or no jobs at all. Now they are working harder in school and have goals for the future as well as the means to achieve them. The means is the Career Beginnings Program.

Hector and Jackie are typical of the thousands of young adults in cities across the United States who have taken part in the Career Beginnings Program. These students, predominantly minority, attend class and usually do their homework but are not performing well in school. Although they are earning some Bs and mostly Cs, their reading and math skills are one to three years below grade level. Furthermore, they tend to be enrolled in general education courses and, therefore, do not take enough solid academic courses during their final years in high school to be admitted to or to successfully perform in college.

Not surprisingly, students with average achievement who stay out of trouble fail to attract the attention of the guidance counselors in urban high schools, where student/counselor ratios range around 300/1 to 500/1, thus making contact with a counselor limited or even nonexistent. In short, the Hectors and Jackies in large urban high schools (and in many rural communities) get little attention from those adults who might help them do better in school and aspire to higher goals. Principals and teachers admit that average students, or students who fail to do anything special, are usually left alone. As one teacher reported, "We do very much for the top, top students and the real problems; but for the average 'nice' kid with low motivation, we don't do much of anything."

These students have the potential to do better, but no one is looking out for them. James, a Career Beginnings student in Hartford, Connecticut, provides a glimpse of this world:

> Before I began participating in Career Beginnings, school wasn't great for me. I didn't have any real goals or plans for after high school and

not much confidence in myself. As I began to get involved in the Career Beginnings Program, I realized that I would soon enter my senior year and maybe college wasn't a far-fetched idea after all. Through Career Beginnings, I found out about college and financial aid options that were available. My mentor was very helpful and supportive throughout the program and my preparation for college. My enthusiasm to go farther in school grew, and I found myself being congratulated by high school counselors and teachers who noticed the difference from last year. Career Beginnings is a program for people who, like me, need some guidance in career and college choices.

What Is the Career Beginnings Program?

Career Beginnings began in 1985 with a national competition among two- and four-year colleges and universities. More than 100 colleges submitted applications, and 24 were selected to pilot the program in their communities. Sponsored nationally by the Commonwealth Fund, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the Gannett Foundation, Inc., the program's national office is at the Center for Human Resources in the Heller Graduate School at Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts. Since it began, Career Beginnings has made a difference in the lives of thousands of young adults in dozens of high schools around the country.

Career Beginnings is a program designed to increase the likelihood of minority and other disadvantaged students to participate in some form of postsecondary education or to obtain a good job. Career Beginnings brings together high schools, businesses, and local colleges in working partnerships, which provide college and career preparation, summer and school-year work experience, special academic tutoring, counseling and support services, and the individual guidance and encouragement of volunteer adult mentors from the business and professional communities. In short, by engaging the entire community in a targeted group effort, Career Beginnings builds on the previously untapped potential of moderately-achieving high school students and helps them to overcome their social and educational deficiencies by exposing them to the college environment and to the world of work in a personal way.

How Career Beginnings Operates

Career Beginnings starts with the premise that there are young people who are neither at the top nor the bottom in school achievement, who are disadvantaged economically, socially, and educationally, but who, with better preparation and some personal attention, can enter college, complete a training program, or start working in an entry-level job with career potential. These students, described by some as marginal, attend class regularly and get average grades, but are unlikely to reach their potential in a postsecondary educational setting or in the workplace without some extra attention.

They may come from families where a college education is not regarded as a realistic choice, or where parents have limited abilities to help them with career planning. As a result, many of these youngsters do not see college or a career in their future. They may fail to finish their senior year because they become immersed in personal or family problems, become pregnant, succumb to an immediate opportunity to earn money, or simply underestimate the lifelong financial and other dividends of earning a diploma.

Over the past three years, the national office for Career Beginnings at Brandeis University has collected data on the students who have participated in the program. Almost 90% of them come from families living below the poverty line or marginally above it. More than 50% are from single-parent homes. Of the more than 7,000 high school students who have participated in the program since 1986, a little more than a third are male; two-thirds are female. A majority are black. In 1988, 60% were black, 20% Hispanic, 6% Indochinese, 12% Caucasian, and less than 1% Native American. Racial characteristics vary depending on the program site. For example, programs in Gary, Indiana, and Jacksonville, Florida, have black enrollments of 95% or more, while programs in California enroll a higher proportion of Hispanic and Asian students.

Academically, Career Beginnings students may be earning Bs and Cs in school; however, on standardized tests, they are not competing

with their cohorts in the suburbs. In a sample taken from seven Career Beginnings sites during 1987-1988, students consistently scored 12 to 24 months below grade level in reading comprehension, vocabulary, and mathematics as measured by the Stanford Reading and Mathematics Achievement Tests.

Two- and four-year colleges and universities in cities throughout the United States administer Career Beginnings at the local level. In partnership with the local school district, the project staff at each college identifies at least 100 students during the beginning of their junior year in high school. For the next two years, the program provides them with a well-rounded selection of activities, which focus on critical career and educational issues affecting their future. The program gives students much needed support as they decide whether to go to college, enter a training program, enlist in the military, or go to work after high school. In short, students learn how to identify and pursue career options and opportunities. Here is how the program works.

First, during the students' junior and senior year, Career Beginnings provides a structured series of workshops and classes in career awareness, college preparation, applying for college admission, decision making, communication, and remediation in basic academic skills, where warranted (it nearly always is). These sessions are designed to assist young people to make the often difficult transition from high school to adulthood.

Second, each student is matched with an adult mentor from the business or professional community. The mentor meets with the student at least once a month to discuss career and college planning. Many disadvantaged youngsters lack access to successful adult role models in their community. Career Beginnings provides that link through a structured, one-on-one mentoring experience.

Third, students have the opportunity to work in entry-level summer jobs with career potential in the private or public sector. This experience helps them to understand the demands of the workplace (punctuality, regular attendance, taking responsibility, etc.) and gives

them an opportunity to earn a regular paycheck (often their first). During the summer, the work experience is accompanied by at least 30 hours of educational enrichment, which helps reduce the learning loss that typically occurs over the summer.

Fourth, ongoing advising, advocacy, and counseling during the school year, as well the summer, keeps students focused on the future and working toward their goals. Each student has an individualized "case management" plan that provides both a tracking mechanism and an early warning system that triggers immediate intervention from the college's Career Beginnings staff. Finally, following high school graduation, the Career Beginnings staff stays in touch with all students to ensure that they are reaching the goals that they have set for themselves.

Career Beginnings provides the advice, support, and extra motivation that these students need. It gives them a mentor who can show them the ropes, who is genuinely interested in their success. It gives them counselors and teachers who are rooting for them all the way, who provide the praise, the patience, the understanding that often is missing in their lives. With its emphasis on higher education and career opportunities as goals, its involvement of colleges and universities as operating partners, and its stress on individual attention and one-on-one mentoring, Career Beginnings provides ongoing institutional and personal relationships that cut across several levels. Nationally, it is a partnership of major foundations, corporations, higher education institutions, and government. At the community level, it creates a new set of collaborative relationships involving local colleges, high schools, and the business community working together on critical issues of education and youth employment.

Perhaps most important is the mentoring component of Career Beginnings. Volunteer adult mentors provide a personal dimension to these young people, which they are unlikely to get from any other source. Career Beginnings mentors, in combination with the professional staff, have specific goals to accomplish that revolve around their students' educational and career plans for the future.

What Are the Results So Far?

In its first three years, Career Beginnings has achieved notable success. Among the 7,000 Career Beginnings students completing the program, high school graduation rates are above 95%, and college attendance rates are above 65%. These figures are in sharp contrast to a National Center for Educational Statistics report showing only one out of three black high school graduates (35%) and less than 40% of Hispanic graduates enrolled in college in 1982. And once enrolled in college, Career Beginners seem to be staying. More than 90% of the college freshmen from the 1986-87 cohort continued their studies during the 1987-88 academic year. Also, 80% of these students completed their second year.

In addition, Career Beginnings students not choosing to go to college are making good career decisions. They are fulfilling the plans they made by enrolling in training programs and working at full-time jobs. In October 1988, nine of out ten of the second cohort of Career Beginnings students (1988 graduates) were either in college, enrolled in training courses, in the military, or on the job. Moreover, results from a preliminary evaluation conducted by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (1988) suggest that participation in the Career Beginnings Program was "effective in improving [students'] prospects for college admissions and that their employment rates also increased."

A Closer Look at the Career Beginnings Model

The previous chapter provided an overview of the Career Beginnings Program. In this chapter, we will examine in greater detail the various components of the Career Beginnings model. This information will be useful to those interested in implementing the program in their own community.

Collaborating for Success

Career Beginnings attempts to marry a variety of components, each unique and separate, which when combined creates a sum greater than its parts. Career Beginnings creates a bond between the students and the college-based program staff by bringing them together on a regular basis. The campus meetings and community activities provide many opportunities for the staff to maintain continuity and to monitor each student's progress both during and after high school. The involvement of high school teachers, counselors, and the volunteer mentors from the community links students to successful people with whom they can talk about their hopes, fears, and dreams.

Halfway through their junior year, students are matched with volunteer mentors from corporations, local businesses, and professions and meet with them, one-on-one, at least once a month for the next 18 to 25 months. (Many mentors and students continue meeting well after high school graduation.) Instructors from the college, the com-

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munity, and the high school provide monthly workshops and classes (more frequently during the summer) to bolster students' academic skills, as well as to introduce them to career planning and college preparation. Career Beginnings advisors at the college and in the high schools make sure students are on track. During the summer months, employers provide a link with the world of work. The combination of individual counseling, mentoring, educational activities, and a quality summer job represents a collaborative effort among various community partners that is the key to a successful program.

Recruiting Students for the Career Beginnings Program

Career Beginnings starts with the assumption that all students are willing to listen to advice and to make informed choices about their own futures. Career Beginnings not only gives advice but, unlike many referral and outreach efforts, it shows students how to get what they want in life. Outreach to the high schools and the involvement of teachers and counselors in the recruitment and implementation phases of the program are critical to the overall success of the project. The students are selected using the following criteria:

1. Current enrollment as a high school junior, with projected eligibility for graduation by the end of the senior year. In some cities, high school sophomores also are served.
2. Regular school attendance, with no significant history of disciplinary problems in school or in the community.
3. Average academic achievement, that is, falling in the middle 60% of their class.
4. Demonstration of personal motivation and commitment beyond typical school activities, such as participation in some form of community-based service or working part-time to contribute to the family income.
5. At least 50% must meet the federal definition of poverty.

6. At least 80% must be first-generation college students, that is, come from families in which neither parent has more than a high school diploma.

Although recruitment methods vary among project sites, most rely on school counselors and teachers to identify students and to conduct the initial screening. Students interested in Career Beginnings are usually required to complete applications, write an autobiographical essay, obtain recommendations from ministers and teachers, and attend an interview with the project staff before acceptance in the program.

Some critics have argued that the group of students served by Career Beginnings is not the group that is most at risk. The national staff, the national advisory committee, and the sponsors of Career Beginnings acknowledge this; but at the outset they made the decision to focus on average students still in high school, those who have the potential to improve their performance within a short period of time without massive intervention and a huge outlay of funds.

Those who work with the Career Beginnings students on a regular basis would not agree that the program "creams" the best students off the top; the entrance criteria guard against that. With more than 75% from families below the poverty level and the academic deficiencies cited earlier, these students are at risk by anyone's standards. In the future, and if more resources become available, Career Beginnings may begin to work with more serious at-risk students. But for the present, much remains to be done for that large group of marginal students, who have received little attention in the past.

The Case Management Approach

The individual student is at the center of the Career Beginnings Program. This calls for a case management system that keeps track of each student in order to provide the counseling, encouragement, and other forms of advocacy needed for the students to achieve their goals.

For many students, a visit to their assigned school counselor is a once- or twice-a-year experience that lasts 15 or 20 minutes at most. Career Beginnings students must receive many more counseling contact hours so that no student is allowed to fall through the cracks.

At Career Beginnings sites, staff members called "student advisors" carry out this critical case management function. With approximately 100 students in a community program, the counseling is divided among several advisors, who are assigned about 15 students each. At some sites, high school teachers and counselors volunteer to be advisors for students in their schools. At other sites, the advisors are part of the college staff and meet students both at the high school and on the college campus. Either way, the Career Beginnings students get personal attention from caring, concerned adults; and they begin to realize that there are people who expect them to do well in school, to attend Career Beginnings activities, and to meet regularly with their mentors. Advisors frequently intervene when problems arise and help students stay on the road to independence.

Every Career Beginnings project reports examples of the importance of a strong case management system. One example from a project site in the South underscores this importance perhaps more dramatically than others.

During 1987, a brother and sister, both participants in Career Beginnings in a large urban city, were abandoned by their mother. Since they had no relatives who could support them, the Career Beginnings staff stepped in and helped these youngsters to complete the paperwork for social services from the Welfare Department and to make new living arrangements. Then, with the help of the staff, both students found part-time jobs to help make ends meet, both graduated from high school, and both were accepted at a nearby college.

Most stories would be complete with that happy ending, but not this one. The staff worked with the college to arrange for full scholarships for both students. Without the efforts and persistence of the staff, mentors, and the students themselves, this happy ending might not

have taken place. With a strong case management system in place and with the resources available to the staff through the Career Beginnings partnership network, these two students have a bright future.

Mentors: New Use of an Old Idea

Before they meet, Career Beginnings students and their assigned mentors share both apprehension and excitement. Given the generation gap and socioeconomic differences, it is somewhat surprising that these structured mentoring relationships work at all. But Career Beginnings somehow seems to offer a neutral environment in which both young people and adults can come together for a common purpose without the tensions frequently associated with more typical adult/adolescent encounters.

For the students, there is excitement in anticipating meeting someone who will help them plan for the future and offer advice about careers. Mentors share that sense of excitement and, like the students, they, too, approach the first meeting with some trepidation. A mentor in Santa Ana, California, described her feelings about the first mentoring session: "When I went to the Career Beginnings orientation where the staff talked about meeting our students, I felt kind of nervous because I hadn't talked to a high school student for a long time. How am I going to be able to help her?" With the support and guidance of Career Beginnings staff, this mentor soon learned that she had a lot to offer her student.

Career Beginnings mentors are bankers, administrators, senior executives, teachers, professors, engineers, doctors, supervisors, and small-business people. Some are retired; most are not. Most fall in the 30 to 50 age range; but many are younger, and quite a few are older. The most senior mentor is in her late seventies. Age and occupation are not important; what is important is the willingness to spend time with a student and to deal with real issues that are vital to the future of that student. Mentors must engender trust and have a real sense of social responsibility to help deserving students succeed.

While the idea of mentoring at-risk students is not new, Career Beginnings provides the necessary guidelines to make it work. In the Career Beginnings mentoring relationship, a key element is the structure of the interaction. Mentoring is not a casual or ad hoc encounter. There is a fine line between taking a student to lunch and being a buddy and being a professional who helps a student deal with life's hurdles. Career Beginnings mentoring has a specific goal: to increase the student's career options and to provide access to information about training and educational opportunities. By the end of their senior year, students should have a career plan and the ability to implement it.

Recruiting good mentors is not an easy task. They do not have to be persons who have had experience with low-income and disadvantaged youth. They should be successful men and women who are committed to helping young people define and reach their goals. They should be able to communicate with adolescents by both listening and drawing them out.

Places to recruit mentors include service clubs, the Chamber of Commerce, professional women's organizations, Private Industry Councils, and corporations. Having several mentors from one company is helpful because the mentors often can meet as a group with a program staff member to discuss their students. For example, a group of mentors at the Chevron Corporation in Bakersfield, California, meet and share ideas on the problems and successes their students are having. This same group organized a special computer-aided tutoring program for their students.

Once a prospective mentor agrees to serve, he or she undergoes a careful screening process and, once selected, participates in an orientation program before being matched with a student. The mentor's training continues throughout the year, with the project staff providing ongoing support and workshops.

Training sessions focus on communicating with teenagers, the problems faced by at-risk youth, the goals of Career Beginnings, and pertinent topics that mentors need to discuss with their students as the year

progresses, such as the preparation of college applications or the skills needed for a successful job interview. Mentors also receive written guidelines for working with their students. And because the mentoring relationship is a two-way street, students receive advice on how to work with a mentor. Monthly phone calls from the staff to both mentors and students are made to check out the progress they are making together.

Career Beginnings mentors are expected to meet with their students at least once each month and to be in touch by phone or letter once or twice during that month. Not surprisingly, as the relationship develops many mentors meet more frequently, particularly as the students prepare to make career and educational decisions. Mentors are encouraged to use their own professional connections to help students when appropriate.

A mentor in Rochester, New York, described how she encourages her student to explore career options and rise to new challenges. "I'm letting her know there are a lot of possibilities out there," she says. To learn more about careers in computer technology, this mentor enlisted her husband, a data technician specialist. He arranged a visit to his office, where the student was able to ask a group of professionals questions about computer courses to take in school and career opportunities after college.

In addition to meetings at the mentor's workplace, students are invited to attend professional meetings and luncheons that expose them to other aspects of the business and professional worlds. Career Beginnings mentors also help students think about other important life skills. They provide advice on budgeting money, managing time, setting priorities, dealing with adversity, and taking responsibility. A mentor in Tennessee remarked, "I think that we have an opportunity to try to start a kid out with a sense of responsibility. I say, 'Here are the kinds of questions you have to ask yourself; I can't give you the answers, but here's how to find them'."

How do students react to mentoring? A student in Jacksonville, Florida, expressed his thoughts this way:

My experience with my mentor has not only been fun and exciting, but it has been a learning experience as well. Before meeting him, I was nervous and skeptical. As the days progressed, we became better acquainted with each other. The influence, guidance, and direction has been overwhelming to me. I have gone to his office to see what type of business he is in. [The mentor was chief executive officer of a major corporation.] Talking to him has had an incredible effect on the way I want to live my life. Being around an important person such as my mentor has given me new meaning to life. The guidance he gives me day after day has led me to become a better person.

He has expressed a genuine interest in me and has made me feel that I am someone important. That has been an inspiration to me. Having a mentor to encourage me in a positive way has made me strive to be better, academically and socially.

Since the establishment of Career Beginnings, there have been more than 7,000 mentoring partnerships. Almost all of these relationships have been productive and satisfying for both mentor and student. What is the secret? Training, clear objectives, and ongoing support from the program staff all contribute to success. But the ultimate key to success was best expressed by one mentor, who said: "Strong empathy and compassion, along with our experience and skills, are building blocks for a healthy, helpful, and satisfying relationship with the young people whom we mentor."

Summer Work, Summer Learning

Many programs for disadvantaged youth provide a summer job to help them gain work experience and a chance to earn some money. These jobs are extremely important. Nationally, as much as 90% of the spring-to-summer change in employment each year for minority youth is associated with organized public and private job programs. Put another way, very few disadvantaged youth are employed through the traditional labor market.

Despite the numerous summer job programs available for low-income youth, for almost half of all Career Beginnings students, their

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summer work is the first real paying job they have had. So it is important that the job be "real," not a make-work situation. The job should be a six- to eight-week experience for learning as well as for earning a paycheck. To find 100 or more "good" jobs each summer, the program staff at the college or university works with local summer job placement organizations or the Private Industry Council (federally funded through the Job Training Partnership Act of 1982), or the staff recruits jobs themselves in the private sector.

Whichever way the project staff decides to operate, each job must be reasonably interesting and provide a challenge. For this reason, cleanup crews and eight hours a day of photocopying are discouraged. Fast-food jobs are acceptable only in instances where a student's previous work experience (or lack thereof) rules out other types of jobs. Typical jobs that Career Beginnings students have held include engineer's assistant, copywriter, research assistant, office assistant in a law firm or government agency, zookeeper, physical therapist assistant, and tour guide. Students have worked in Fortune 500 corporations, small businesses, city and state government, and nonprofit organizations.

Because it is extremely important that students are supervised by skilled adults, Career Beginnings encourages a low student-to-supervisor ratio and asks that the supervisors take a personal interest in their students. Much of the research about the effectiveness of summer job programs indicates that the quality of the supervision, even more than the job itself, is a significant factor in the overall success of the experience. In any organization there are some supervisors capable of motivating young people to do their best and some who are not. Career Beginnings projects are selective about where they place students, and they follow up regularly during the summer to ensure that the student is peforming adequately and receiving the most from the experience.

When describing her summer work experience, a Career Beginnings student said:

When I began, I only had one thing in mind: to work hard to earn some money for the summer. I never thought the experience would offer so much. Luckily for me, I was hired to work in a department where everyone was caring and understanding. From the first day, I realized that this was not just a job – it was going to be a learning experience.

The summer months also are a time when much more can be provided than work experience alone. In addition to a summer job, Career Beginnings students receive academic and personal enrichment sessions in career development, college planning, rules of the workplace, and personal improvement (communication and study skills, math, language arts, decision making, and so forth) for the equivalent of one day each week. Some Career Beginnings projects house students on the campus; others hold weekly meetings with college instructors and students. Many students receive high school and college credits for the time that they spend in classes. Typically, the summer activities also include picnics, field trips, special events, and social activities. A Career Beginnings student in Cleveland, Ohio, wrote:

I enjoyed going on the college tours to Wilberforce University and Central State University this summer. College is very different from high school. In college, you're on your own and independent. There's nobody there to wake you up and tell you it's time to go to class! I also enjoyed our visit to the law school at Case Western Reserve University. I learned how difficult it is to become a lawyer and how many years of education are required.

School-Year Activities

While summer programs are important, most of the Career Beginnings work with students occurs during the school year. All during their junior and senior years, students attend workshops, special events, and classes at the college. Different activities take place every month and focus on specific objectives in the areas of career development, postsecondary education, employability skills, academic preparation, and personal development.

Also, each participating college offers instructional opportunities and social activities. During the early fall, for example, the project may offer a workshop series to prepare students for the SAT or ACT examination required for college admission. In addition, colleges offer special classes on completing college applications and financial aid forms, on career opportunities in engineering or health, or on writing the college essay.

One college partner calls its campus workshops "Topics & Pizza" because it provides refreshments – usually pizza – at the end of each session. Many colleges issue identification cards to their Career Beginnings students, allowing them to use the library, gym, and other facilities on campus. This "perk" impresses the students and is regarded as a status symbol back at the high school.

The Career Beginnings Program is not all work, though. Students frequently attend music, athletic, and theater events on campus and in the community. During the past three years, more than 250 students received national scholarships to attend an Outward Bound Wilderness Program for two weeks at the end of the summer. These students climbed mountains, hiked, swam, and canoed in Maine, North Carolina, Colorado, California, and Minnesota. Last year, Des Moines Career Beginnings students took a bus trip to Kansas City, where they toured the Federal Reserve Bank, an art museum, and two amusement parks. Visits to colleges both in and out of state are annual events at most Career Beginnings project sites.

Career Beginnings frequently involves students in volunteer community service activities as part of their personal development curriculum. Students in Tennessee helped to renovate a home for developmentally disabled adults. In New York, students tutor elementary school children to fulfill their yearly community service requirement. Indiana students presented their views on Career Beginnings at a statewide conference on higher education. In Minnesota, students testified at a state conference of legislators and business leaders who were looking at ways to improve public education.

All of these experiential and academically oriented activities are designed to help students to: 1) think realistically about future career aspirations, 2) examine alternative postsecondary education opportunities, 3) learn to communicate with adults and peers more effectively, and 4) set personal goals and make the critical decisions needed to fulfill them. Taken as a whole, the various Career Beginnings activities provide continuity and maintain momentum for a group of students who often lack direction and do not work up to their potential.

For a group of students who are perceived to be turned off to education and often dislike school, the response of Career Beginnings students to the program has been very positive. In both 1987 and 1988, 85% of Career Beginnings seniors reported being "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the program. On average, less than 2% indicated that they were dissatisfied. More than 90% described the college-based staff as good or excellent; and more than 85% said the same about the academic curriculum and the workshops.

Life After High School

The excitement of graduation week begins to fade rather quickly once students realize that the safety net of high school is no longer available. As they think about their future plans and new responsibilities and about leaving friends and family behind, they often feel ambivalent about the decisions that only a few weeks earlier seemed just perfect. The situation is different for Career Beginnings students. They have the advantage of a continuing relationship, although less involved, with their mentors and the Career Beginnings program staff at the college.

For example, students heading off to college may need a summer job to earn money for tuition, books, and living expenses. To prepare for the rigors of college-level work, many Career Beginnings students may require some remedial help the summer before college starts. Young people entering training programs or apprenticeships have the same concerns. For those students planning to work full time,

the job search is often stressful. To be successful on the job, students need to change their world-view from high school to the workplace – a difficult task for young people who do not have adult support and assistance. Finally, a few Career Beginnings graduates will not yet have made a career or education decision by the time they graduate from high school. They will require frequent contact and special counseling to help them make that first decision. For all these concerns, the program staff stands ready to help in making the transition to adulthood.

Career Beginnings is ultimately successful only if the students who go to college actually graduate, only if the students who go to work stay on the job, earn decent wages, and continue to learn, only if the students in training programs complete their course of study and obtain jobs that fit their abilities and aptitudes. To this end, every Career Beginnings project is expected to track the progress of its graduates for at least 15 months after high school graduation. This tracking process is important for evaluating the program at each site, while at the same letting the students know that they are not alone and that help is available when and if they need it.

For two years, eight Career Beginnings sites have been involved in a pilot project called Next Step, which broadens the follow-up beyond just tracking an occasional contact. It is intended to give students tangible assistance from the Career Beginnings staff on a regular schedule. Activities have included information updates and newsletters, monthly phone calls, vacation get-togethers, special events, and individual counseling when needed. Students have received "college survival kits" with information about maintaining financial aid and negotiating the maze of living arrangements on campus. Those working or about to look for work have attended job-search workshops and have been coached for interviewing. Quite a few students who began working right after graduation have decided that college was a good idea after all, and have benefited from the advocacy, counseling, and special assistance that the staff provides. Maintaining the

mentoring relationship also is encouraged, and many mentors continue to see their students as often as possible.

Preliminary findings support the hypothesis that maintaining contact and providing follow-up services after high school graduation pays off in helping disadvantaged and low-income students to overcome the initial social and academic pressures they feel when starting college. Almost 95% of the Career Beginnings students entering college in the fall of 1987 completed their freshman year and began a second year of college. This retention rate is higher than the typical retention rate for minority students, which according to one researcher (Tinto 1987) is just over 60% for blacks and 54% for Hispanics during their first two years of college.

Career Beginnings staff will be watching its students carefully over the next three years to find out just how well they did in school, on the job, and in training programs. In the meantime, based on preliminary results, the Next Step concept will be incorporated into the Career Beginnings Program as part of the overall services for all program alumni. And a new pilot program, called Higher Ground, will begin helping college-bound Career Beginnings students in 1990.

What Have We Learned from the Career Beginnings Program?

Since Career Beginnings began in 1986, we have learned much, although many questions remain unanswered. While reluctant to call the program an unqualified success, we believe that there are some lessons that can be shared with others interested in helping disadvantaged students make the transition from adolescence to responsible adulthood.

First, colleges and universities are proving they can be effective centers for program design and management. They have demonstrated that they can act as the hub of community partnerships serving at-risk high school students. Although it is too early to tell to what extent Career Beginnings will be institutionalized within the college or whether the relationships with the local high schools and business interests will lead to more involvement and interaction, it is clear, even now, that the more successful project sites are those with strong support from the college and especially from the president or chancellor. When Career Beginnings becomes accepted as part of the broader mission of the college or university, the leadership is willing to move beyond lip service and to provide tangible resources in the form of funding and other support services for the project staff.

Second, the targeting of the marginal high school student for the Career Beginnings Program has focused much-needed attention on a group of students who have not been well served in the past. This middle 60% of the nation's high school students will make up the vast

majority of tomorrow's labor force. How we deal with them today will greatly influence the nation's economic well-being in the future. Admittedly, the Career Beginnings Program, by itself, cannot meet the needs of every one of these students; but high schools can use the experience of Career Beginnings to develop their own programs that provide more personalized group and individual counseling, that offer a more challenging academic schedule, and that encourage these students to do their best. We have ample evidence that high school teachers and counselors who have served as Career Beginnings student advisors enthusiastically embrace this approach. We believe that many other teachers and counselors, if offered the chance, would agree to work with a small group of young people; they just need encouragement and support to do it.

Third, there is no substitute for a good program model. While each component of the Career Beginnings model is important by itself, it is difficult to isolate the ones that have the greatest impact on student outcomes. Each student responds differently, a fact that justifies having a variety of components – mentoring, work experience, counseling, academic support, workshops, and the like – to ensure that students will have multiple experiences and opportunities for participation. While we hope that every student will benefit from every component, we know that this is unrealistic. However, the Career Beginnings model is structured so that the sum is greater than its parts, and that has proven to be so.

Mentoring has proven to be a powerful component of the Career Beginnings model. Young people find that they need the help of adults in thinking about the uncertainties that they face, and they respond to the mentors with enthusiasm and affection. The summer work and learning experiences are extremely successful in helping young people make the link between work and education. To the surprise of many, the students even like the academic component of the model. Even with a successful model, however, it is the intensity and the care with which it is delivered that makes the difference. Both men-

tors and student advisors provide much individual attention; and we believe that this structured personal attention from adults who convey a "can do" attitude is the key to getting students to believe in themselves.

Fourth, the staff and administrators at each project site must have a high degree of competence and commitment. Career Beginnings is a very labor-intensive program to run on a daily basis. Working with 100 students and 100 mentors and being responsible for activities ranging from teaching career decision making to being sure each student has a summer job is draining on anyone, no matter how committed. The college administration must be willing to support a staffing level sufficient to meet the needs of the program. This usually involves a major role in fund-raising. In addition, the project staff must have opportunities for growth and development. The national office helps by providing meetings and seminars each year, but the college administration also can help by encouraging staff to take courses, to pursue research in their field of interest, and to attend special Career Beginnings workshops and events off-campus.

Fifth, perhaps the most rewarding lesson from Career Beginnings is the contributions and commitment of individual volunteers in the project – the mentors and the business/professional groups in the community. Clearly, the college-based project staff cannot carry out the program by themselves; they need help from individuals, agencies, and institutions in the community. As a result, new partnerships have developed among institutions and groups of individuals who have never worked together before. Because the involvement of partnerships in Career Beginnings requires more than a signature on an agreement or a promise to donate equipment, this aspect of the program requires a great deal of coordination by the staff each year. Nevertheless, these partnerships have been enormously helpful in providing vital services to students and to the program as a whole.

Although establishing and administering the Career Beginnings Program has not been without its problems along the way, the results

have been extremely positive. After three years of operation, the results have been positive enough to assert that Career Beginnings is a model that should be part of every community's arsenal for fighting student apathy and failure. While no claim is made for Career Beginnings as a panacea for the problems of low-income, minority, and disadvantaged youth, it can be an important part of the solution, a solution that must be found soon.

What of the Future?

The national office of Career Beginnings at Brandeis University serves as a catalyst for developing new Career Beginnings sites. It also provides training, technical assistance, and support to the colleges and universities that operate the program across the country. In order to learn more about the dynamics of the program and ways that it can be more effective, the national office is engaged in several research projects.

Earlier, mention was made of a preliminary evaluation of the Career Beginnings Program. This evaluation is continuing and will provide data on college attendance, earnings from jobs, and family formation among Career Beginnings students from seven different project sites and an equal number of students from those same areas who did not participate in the program. Also, an implementation analysis has just been concluded at 10 sites to examine factors that are believed to be critical to program success, such as administration, staffing, program activities and their intensity, level of partnership activity, commitment of the college, and so forth. This study will be enormously helpful in planning training activities and in recruiting new college partners.

Another study begun in 1989 deals with the mentoring component of the program. This survey of 400 mentors and their students focuses on mentor attitudes; the mentor/student relationship; factors affecting both positive and negative relationships; and racial, gender, and ethnic considerations when matching students with mentors.

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The last piece of research currently being planned will examine the long-term economic and social effects of Career Beginnings and similar programs that serve at-risk youth. Through research of this type, we hope to learn how to improve and extend Career Beginnings to more cities and institutions of higher education. Most important, we hope to learn more about ways to deal with the problems disadvantaged youth face as they begin their transition from high school to adulthood.

An Invitation to Participate

The colleges, universities, and school systems currently involved in Career Beginnings have made a commitment to deal with a problem that has been ignored for too long. We need many more if we are to reach the millions of young people who could profit from this program. Over the next few years, we plan to invite more colleges and universities to participate in Career Beginnings and to start programs in their cities. We welcome your questions about the program. Write to:

Career Beginnings Program
National Program Office
Center for Human Resources
Heller Graduate School
Brandeis University
60 Turner Street, P.O. Box 9110
Waltham, MA 02254-9110
Phone: (617) 736-3770 or 1-800-343-4705

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